

Corsairs & Captives

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ALGIERS – AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 1627

DECEMBER 7, 2022 • ADAM NICHOLS • CAPTIVES

Quite a few descriptions of Algiers penned by European observers have come down to us from the seventeenth century. One of the most interesting is that written by Reverend Ólafur Egilsson.

Reverend Ólafur was captured in July of 1627 on the island of Heimaey, one of the Westman Islands off the south coast of Iceland, by Barbary corsairs from Algiers. He, his young pregnant wife, and two of their

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children, along with nearly 250 other islanders, were herded aboard the corsair ships and taken to Algiers.

After a month-long sea voyage, the Icelanders found themselves on the block in the *Badestan* (the Algiers slave market; see the map of Algiers below for its location), being auctioned off to the highest bidder. Reverend Ólafur, however, wasn't sold as a slave. He was in his sixties—too old to fetch a good price—and his captors packed him off to Copenhagen instead (Iceland was a Danish possession in those days) to negotiate ransoms for his family and the other Icelandic captives.

Upon his return to Iceland, Reverend Ólafur wrote a long narrative chronicling his experiences, in which he described the raid on Heimaey, the voyage to Algiers, Algiers itself, and his journey across Europe to Copenhagen.

What follows below is his description of Algiers. It is a rather eccentric description. He was only there for about a month all told—from the middle of August to the middle of September—and didn't get to see all that much of the city, for he spent most of his time cooped up in the house of one of his captors.

So his isn't a comprehensive description of the city. Rather, he describes what he saw in glimpses as he was being hauled through the streets from one house to another in the process of negotiating his release and subsequent voyage to Copenhagen. In a sense, it's a series of snapshots—very interesting snapshots, for they provide details not found in other descriptions of Algiers of the time.

So here it is: Reverend Ólafur Egilsson's description of Algiers as it was in August-September, 1627.

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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When we poor Icelandic people were put on land [in Algiers], such a huge crowd gathered that I think it was impossible to count their number. They did not come for any cruel purpose, but only to look at the poor captives. We Icelanders were separated from each other—friend from friend, children from their parents—and driven through the streets, from one house to another, to the marketplace, where we were put up for auction as if we were sheep or cattle.

The people who had been captured in East Iceland [in an earlier part of the corsair raid on Iceland] were first offered for sale, the men being kept separate in some houses, the women in other houses. This went on until the 28th of August, by which time most of the East Iceland people were sold.

After that, the people from the Westman Islands were brought to the marketplace [i.e., the *Badestan*; see the map of Algiers for its location], which was a square built up of stones with seats encompassing it all around. The ground was paved with stones which appeared glossy—which I understand is because they were washed every day, as were the main houses, sometimes as much as three times a day. This marketplace was next to where their local King [i.e., The Pasha, the Ottoman Governor of Algiers] had his seat, so that he would have the shortest way there, because, as I was told by those who had been there a long time (and were and are still Christians), their laws concerning the sharing out of captives were as follows.

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First and foremost, the Captain got to have whichever two of the captives he wanted. Then their King (if I may call him that) took every eighth man, every eighth woman, every eighth boy, and then every eighth child. When he had taken these, the people who remained were divided into two groups, one for the ship owners and one for the pirates themselves.

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Map of Algiers

We poor Westman Islands people were taken to the marketplace in groups, each of thirty. The Turks guarded each group in front and behind and counted heads at each street corner because the inhabitants of that place will steal such captive people if they get the chance.

When we came to the marketplace, we were placed in a circle, and everyone's hands and face were inspected. Then the King chose from this group those whom he wanted, every eighth, as I mentioned earlier.

His first choice amongst the boys was my own poor son, eleven years old, whom I will never forget as long as I live because of the depth of his

understanding and knowledge. When he was taken from me, I asked him in God's name not to forsake his faith nor forget his catechism. He said with great grief, "I will not, my father! They can treat my body as they will, but my soul I shall keep for my good God."

I have to say with Job: What is my strength, that I should hope? Were one to try to weigh my misery and suffering altogether on a scale, they would be heavier than all the sand in the sea.

The other Icelanders were moved from there to another place, and one of the Turks led two groups of ten around a stone column with loud screaming which I did not understand. I and my wife and our two younger children, a one-year-old and a one-month-old, were taken from that place up to the King's hall [i.e., the *Dar al-Soultan*, the Pasha's Palace; see the map of Algiers for its location], and there we sat with the children in our arms for two hours.

From there, we were then taken to the King's prison [aka the Bagnio Grande; see the map of Algiers], where we spent that night.

From that time on, I do not know what became of the rest of the Icelandic people.

What I saw in that place of evil people is difficult for me to describe because I was so disoriented and grief-stricken at that time.

The first thing that we captives met on the streets when we came ashore were the donkeys, heavily laden. These animals are small by our standards, no

bigger than a two-year-old mare, but they are very strong for carrying things. They have ears almost an ell long [an ell was about 21 inches/53 centimeters]. Their tails are thinner than horses' tails, and their coats are patchy, like thin beards here and there. They walk with a feeding basket on their mouths, tethered by a string band slipped behind their ears, in which is the bread that they eat while walking. This goes on day after day.

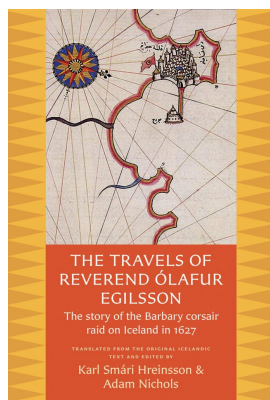
I saw no wagons used for work in that place. There were many horses with feed baskets filled with bread. These horses were very thin. Most of them pulled the quern to grind meal.

In that town, I also saw five camels, which are strong and enormous. I could hardly reach up to their backs when they had their saddles on—which I think are normally kept on them. It is my opinion that each of these animals can carry as much as four or five horses. They are all pale or fawn-colored, with a dark stripe down their backs. In some ways they resemble cattle, especially about their legs and feet, which are cloven. They have a humped back, very long necks, and smallish ears almost like those of a horse. Their heads are very ugly, and they have lips like a bull's. They also carry a feed basket of bread hung from their mouths. These animals are very slow. When they are whipped about their hind legs, they do not react in any way.

I also saw a dwarf man there and a dwarf woman, because they are so common in that town. He looked to me to be less than two ells tall, and she one and half ells tall. He had a short trunk and was long-legged with long arms reaching almost down to his knees. He was black as pitch with a big head. She was astonishingly fat, with short, fat legs and a long trunk. I also saw birds of many different types and

colors and behaviors. And I saw a peacock and many other sorts of birds in an aviary.

For more of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson's description of Algiers, see the next post here in this blog.



The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson

The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627

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ALGIERS – AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 1627 – PART 2

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Last week, we looked at Reverend Ólafur Egilsson's description of Algiers as it was in August-September, 1627. This week, we continue with that description.

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(Parts of Reverend Ólafur's description require some explanation; I have done this in footnotes.)

Now about the town itself, even though I do not like to talk about it much.

I want to explain that it is white as chalk from limestone, which is boiled in big iron kettles, under each of which fire burns in four places. The town is built upon the slope of a mountain. It is narrower at the upper end near the top of the mountain. Seen from a distance, it seems to be about a mile wide.

Each house is open at the top, and there are small, narrow rooms where people sleep. The windows have nothing other than iron gratings in them. Because of the great heat which is there from the sun, men and women go almost without clothes.

Because the sun is always high in the sky, the land grows two crops during the year, and all the fruits of the earth—corn, grapes, grain—grow like this. The grass is never cut, and sheep and cattle are never put into houses because there is no winter there, never any frost or snow at any time the whole year round. The sheep, which are both big and very fat, lamb two times a year. There are no barren or gelded sheep. In one day, I saw 100 rams, with tails hanging nearly down to the ground.

As for people's clothes, those who came to this land as Christians kept to their own manner of dress. The Turks say that in that place there are 9,000 Christian people who have been there for a very long time.^[1]

The Turkish women wear very good dresses with many folds and pleats around the waist. These dresses are made of silk, of the finest weave which I

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think exists in the world. They are not open, except at the neck. Also, the women wear linen trousers down to their shoes, attaching one end of the cuffs to their instep and the other to their heels. They wear skullcaps made of linen, which are neat and handily made, and a mantle which is made either of circular-woven linen or other valuable weaving. When they go outside, they wrap the lap of the mantle around their face so that, when they walk on the streets, nobody knows them.^[2] Indoors, they wear good plain clothes without folds, though they wear linen trousers. The Christian women are dressed in a similar way, except that they do not wear linen trousers.

In that place, plates and serving dishes are all made of either clay or copper. Dishes and washbasins are of tinned copper, but the drinking cups are all made of clay and have clay necks. Everyone has the same sort of drinking cups, both the Turks and the prisoners. In that place, they drink only warm, brackish water, which in many places is brought into the houses.^[3]

Most people in that place sleep on the floor without a mattress but place thick blankets beneath and on top of them—though I had no experience of these. There were no storage chests to be seen and no barrels, where I was, and no tables or benches. They do not use knives when eating, and, as far as I could see, there were no spoons except those made of wood. There was no iron on the doors except for three hinges. Most houses had swinging doors. When food is eaten, people sit straight legged on the floor.

During that time, I was barefoot and had no shoes. Then God awakened one French man who had been there for a long time. That man gave me new shoes and some aqua vitae [brandy] when I was sick. He

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also gave me some homespun woolen cloth three ells in length. And that same man told me that many Icelandic people were lying sick and dying all around the town, which did not make me happy. He also told me that in the Christian cemetery there were already thirty-one people buried. The Icelanders could not endure the terrible heat of that place. [4]

That same French man also told me that a girl who had been my servant, who was very good looking, had been sold—first for 700 dalers. But then a rich man came from Jerusalem and paid 1,000 dalers for her and took her back with him to Jerusalem, where he gave her to a Christian man.[5] In that place, Christian men cannot have intercourse with Turkish women, nor Turkish men with Christian women. Otherwise, they lose their lives.

About such things I do not have need to write further, except to say that I witnessed these things and that they are truth.

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On the 20th day of September, I was taken from the house where I was imprisoned by four men and brought to the street where the house containing my wife and babies was located. I begged with all humbleness and prayer of the men who had fetched me that I might be allowed to say goodbye to my wife and the children who were with her, all of whom were deadly sick. I was hardly allowed ten words with them, however, and then my captors callously pulled me away.

After this painful meeting with my family, I was taken to the street where the official who was to issue me a safe-conduct lived. This safe-conduct, written in many different languages, I was to give to any

Turkish pirates who might capture a ship on which I was a passenger. The document explained that I should neither be killed nor interfered with because I was acting as a messenger. I still have this document and have shown it to several people, including the Archbishop of Copenhagen.

In order to receive this safe-conduct, I had to kiss the pirates' hands again.

That same day, I was put aboard an Italian ship and sailed away from Algiers.

[1] By “Turks,” Reverend Ólafur means the Muslim inhabitants of Algiers. Like other Europeans of the time, Icelanders used the word “Turk” as a generic term for all Muslims. It is not clear whether the “9,000 Christian people” Reverend Ólafur mentions is a reference to slaves or to renegades. There were about 25,000 Christian slaves in Algiers and environs at this time, and something like 8,000 renegades. So perhaps Reverend Ólafur is referring to the renegade population. He is certainly not referring to a free Christian population. There was no substantial free Christian population in Algiers.

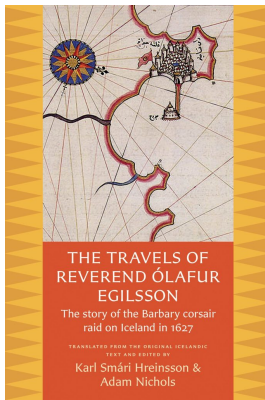
[2] Reverend Ólafur seems to be describing a version of the *hijab*, the traditional head covering that some Muslim women wear in public.

[3] Algiers in the seventeenth century had an aqueduct that brought water into the town.

[4] Many of the Icelandic captives died of sickness within a few weeks of their arrival in Algiers.

[5] The “daler” mentioned by Reverend Ólafur is the Danish rigsdaler, the standard silver coin used by the

Danes at the time, It was equivalent in value to the famous Spanish piece of eight. Young attractive European women fetched high prices in the *Badestan* (the slave market)—they much were sought after as additions to wealthy men's harems. The ransom demanded for Reverend Ólafur's pregnant wife and young child was 1,200 dalers. This was a great deal of money: 1,200 *rigsdalers* equalled approximately 30 years' worth of wages for an ordinary Icelander.



The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson

The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627

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JANISSARIES IN ALGIERS – PART 1

SEPTEMBER 12, 2021 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

More than any other North African city, perhaps, Algiers epitomized for Europeans the horrors of

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piracy and the slave trade. They described it using phrases like “the throne of piracy,” “that city fatal to all Christians,” and “the nest and receptacle of pirates.”

Algiers did not just suddenly spring up as an opportunistic pirate town, though, the way seventeenth century Caribbean pirate havens like Tortuga or Port Royal did. It had a history dating back to the Roman era and beyond.

For long centuries, it existed as a relatively unimportant merchant port. It was a “the nest and receptacle of pirates” back then too, but a relatively modest nest. Its rise to prominence as one of the premier corsair capitals of the Mediterranean was a consequence not of piracy itself but, rather, of a large-scale geo-political shift in the Mediterranean basin that occurred in the early sixteenth century.

The genesis of that shift lay in events that occurred in Spain, which for the better part of eight hundred years—from the beginning of the eighth until the end of the fifteenth centuries—had been under Muslim domination.

At its greatest extent in the eighth century, al-Andalus (as Muslim Spain was called) included Portugal, almost all of what is now Spain itself, the Balearic Islands, and even the southwestern corner of the French Mediterranean.

Spanish forces fought a continuing battle against this occupation—known as the Reconquista (the re-conquest)—and in 1492, the combined armies of Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon (the same Isabella and Ferdinand who underwrote Christopher Columbus’ voyage to the

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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New World) finally overran the last Muslim kingdom, the Emirate of Granada, in southern Spain.

As a consequent, something like 200,000 al-Andalus Muslims fled as refugees to North Africa.

Spain had been locked in a bitter struggle with the Muslim world for centuries, and the victory in Granada was not seen as the end of the fight. As far as the Spanish were concerned, the greater Muslim threat had only been temporarily checked. Flush with confidence from their victory, they decided to protect the homeland by taking the fight to the enemy.

If this phrasing sounds familiar, it is because the relationship between Spain and Islamic North Africa at the turn of the sixteenth century is eerily similar to the relationship between America and the Islamic Middle East in the early twenty-first century.

Just as twenty-first-century America invaded Afghanistan and Iraq to “protect the homeland,” so sixteenth-century Spain invaded North Africa for much the same reason.

During the first two decades of the sixteenth century, Spanish forces marched eastwards along the Maghreb, systematically overrunning and occupying one town after another. They forced those settlements they did not outright conquer and occupy to sign treaties of capitulation and pay tribute. All this was seen at the time as a triumph and a vindication of the “take it to the enemy” strategy.

But just as the American invasions provoked a violent blowback—inspiring a new generation of *jihadists*, making al-Qaeda a larger, more prominent organization than it had been, and galvanizing the

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Islamic State into being—the Spanish invasion of North Africa spawned a similar *jihad*.

The Muslim exiles from al-Andalus, vowing vengeance, led reprisal attacks and corsair raids against the Spanish, and Muslims from many areas came to defend the *Dar-al-Islam* (the Abode of Islam) from the infidel threat—the very essence of holy war.

Algiers was one of the towns that the Spanish overran but did not occupy.

In 1510, the rulers of Algiers had been forced to sign a treaty acknowledging Spanish sovereignty and committing them to pay an annual tribute. To enforce this arrangement, the Spanish built a fort (known as the Peñon) on one of the islands in the bay on which Algiers sat and mounted cannons there to control the harbor—and thus the city. When King Ferdinand died in 1516, the Algerines saw this as an opportune moment to escape the hated infidel domination. They did not have the military resources to do it on their own, though.

For help, they called upon the Barbarossa brothers—Arūj and Hayreddin—legendary pirates who for years had been attacking Spanish shipping and raiding Spanish coasts (with the guidance of revenge-hungry al-Andalus refugees) as part of the holy war against Spain, the Great Satan. The Barbarossa brothers had a fleet of ships and could call up thousands of men in a just cause—such as liberating Algiers from the infidels.

Arūj, the elder brother, was a man of vaulting ambition, however. He did not just want to liberate Algiers; he wanted to rule it. He accepted the request of the Algiers authorities to come to the

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city's aid, but soon after his arrival, he killed the ruler of the city (strangled him in his bath, so the story goes) and took control. His ambition did not end there. He wanted to establish a great empire, and so he set about trying to conquer the territory surrounding Algiers.

It proved his undoing. A scant two years later, he was killed in a clash with Spanish troops near the town of Tlemcen (some 280 miles /450 kilometers west of Algiers), and his dreams of a Barbarossa empire were shattered.

Hayreddin, Arūj's younger brother, managed to hold on to Algiers. It took over a decade, but in 1529, he finally overwhelmed and destroyed the Peñon and wrenched Algiers from Spanish control. Hayreddin was just as ambitious as his older brother—but less monomaniacal. He realized that, alone, Algiers would not be able to stand against the Spanish, and so he offered allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent.

The Sultan happily agreed to this deal, and Algiers became part of the sprawling Ottoman Empire. To seal the arrangement, the Sultan granted the title of Beylerbey (from the Turkish, meaning Bey of Beys, i.e., Commander of Commanders) to Hayreddin. In order to ensure Hayreddin's control of the city, he also sent a contingent of some 2,000 janissaries.

And so janissaries first arrived in Algiers.

For more on the janissaries of Algiers, see the next post in this series [here](#) in this blog.

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JANISSARIES IN ALGIERS – PART 2

AUGUST 30, 2021 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of *Janissaries in Algiers – Part 1*. If you haven't done so already, it's best to

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read that post before continuing on here.)

The 2,000 janissaries that Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Sultan, sent to Algiers around 1530 to shore up Hayreddin Barbarossa's rule of that city were part of an elite military organization.

By today's standards, they were an odd bunch, for they were, technically, slaves.

The origins of the janissaries dated back to the fourteenth century, when the Ottoman Sultan of the time, Murad I, gathered together young male slaves taken as captives in wars against infidel enemies to create an elite military unit: the *Kapıkulu Ocağı* ("servants (slaves) of the hearth" in Turkish, i.e., servants of the Sultan's hearth). The Ottoman Sultanate—like autocratic rulerships everywhere—was beset by a swirling complex of political intrigue, with different local factions vying for power. It was a challenge for a Sultan to know who to trust and who not to trust. Since slaves were not part of local political alliances and had no remaining family ties, they could be trained to be loyal to the Sultan and serve as a force he could trust and rely on.

These slaves were available to the Sultan because of a tradition known as the *pencyek*: sultans were entitled to one fifth of all booty taken in a just war against the infidels—including captives. Murad I and his successors exercised their *pencyek* right and gathered up young, healthy male captives, trained them, and formed them into a military unit that served the Sultans alone.

This system proved successful enough that, after a few decades, it was expanded. The *pencyek* could not supply enough young bodies, though, and it was augmented with a new method of acquiring slaves:

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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the *devşirme* (a Turkish term meaning “collecting” or “gathering,” though it is also translated sometimes as “blood tax” or “child levy”). Starting around the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries, the *devşirme* began to replace the *pencyek* as the prime source of eligible young men.

As with the *pencyek* captives, those gathered by the *devşirme* came from non-Muslim territory. They were not captives taken in war, though. Every five years or so, Turkish officials accompanied by special military units would travel through the Balkans (then a territory of the Ottoman Empire) and, later, Anatolia (what is now Geographical Turkey) choosing healthy young boys and removing them from Christian families. Christians could live in Muslim lands and retain their religion because of their protected *dhimmī* status as “people of the book”; they paid a head tax known as the *jizya* and were treated as second-class citizens in many ways, but they were otherwise free to live their lives and practice their religion.

The Turkish *devşirme* expeditions took boys between the ages of six and ten, averaging about one out of every forty households. It was, of course, traumatic for the families involved—at least for most of them. For some, however, especially the very poor, having their young son taken as a janissary-to-be could represent a potential positive development, for as a janissary their son might actually have a chance at a better life.

The boys acquired during the *devşirme* expeditions were not immediately given military training. Instead, they were distributed among Turkish families, taught to speak Turkish, and converted to Islam. Mostly, they went to farms and spent the next six or seven years of their lives toiling in the fields.

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This provided free labor for the Turkish farmers, but all that physical work also produced strapping young men. At the end of their time on the farm, the *devşirme* boys had been thoroughly acculturated: they were Muslim instead of Christian, spoke Turkish instead of their original language, and were fit and ready for military training.

The training wasn't just military, though. The *acemiler*, as they were known (the "recruits"), were taught the use of the sword, the javelin, the bow, and the matchlock musket, but they were also trained as engineers, clerics, and administrators. Depending on his aptitudes, a particular *acemi* might take any of a number of career paths, for janissaries became not only soldiers but also bureaucrats, provincial governors and viziers.

The initial training for these *acemiler* was extremely strict. They lived in communal barracks, were expected to remain celibate, and were put through a grueling instruction regimen for anything up to five or six years. At the end of it, they formed a highly disciplined, highly trained military organization, the members of which lived and worked and fought (and died) together as brothers.

They became *Yeni Çeri* (new soldiers)—the English term "janissaries" being a corruption of the original Turkish. This designation derived from the original founding of the janissaries as "new soldiers" rather than referring to the newly commissioned *acemiler* themselves.

The *Yeni Çeri* had no life outside their military unit and were expected to remain unmarried. The children of those who did end up marrying later on life were not permitted to become janissaries. Each

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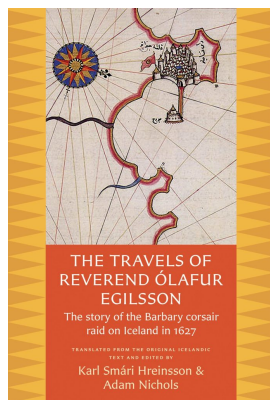
succeeding generation was drawn from a new crop of *devşirme* boys.

One of the odd ironies about the janissaries is that they remained slaves. They were slaves of the Sultan, though. As such, they actually had higher status than many freemen. They were an elite force, and they knew it. They filled positions in every part of the Ottoman government, both civilian and military. In time, they even became king makers.

Such were the 2,000 janissaries that Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Sultan, sent to Algiers around 1530 to shore up Hayreddin Barbarossa's rule of that city.

Their posting there changed them in ways nobody at the time could have anticipated, however.

For more on the janissaries of Algiers, see the next post in this series here in this blog.



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The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627

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JANISSARIES IN ALGIERS – PART 3

AUGUST 23, 2021 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of Janissaries in Algiers – Parts 1 & 2. If you haven't done so already, it's best to

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January 9, 2023

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The 2,000 janissaries that Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Sultan, sent to Algiers around 1520 to shore up Hayreddin Barbarossa's rule of that city changed dramatically the power dynamics in the region. Hayreddin now had a professional standing army at his command (as long as he remained loyal to the Sultan).

One of the janissaries' first official acts in their new home was to efficiently (and brutally) put down a revolt against Hayreddin's rule by local tribesmen. After quickly defeating the rebel forces, they displayed the severed heads of several hundred executed rebels as a public demonstration that a new military force had arrived.

The janissaries would have been unlike anything the indigenous Algerian tribesmen had ever see before. Most armies at this time—in both North Africa and Europe—were composed of conscripts, volunteers, and mercenaries brought together on a temporary basis for particular conflicts and then disbanded (maintaining a standing army was cripplingly expensive).

Janissaries were something very different: a professional military force. They wore matching uniforms (which few military forces of the time did), were well trained, had excellent discipline, and had strong *esprit de corps*. All of this made them formidable adversaries. More important in a practical sense, though, was the fact that they had mastered the use of firearms. Sixteenth century janissaries used the harquebus—the matchlock rifle. They were excellent marksmen and were among the first to perfect the use of volley firing (where one rank of harquebusiers fired in unison, then knelt to reload

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while another rank behind them took its turn to fire, and so on).

This combination of military discipline and devastating fire power was pretty much unstoppable, at least as far as the local North African tribesmen of the time were concerned.

The brutal effectiveness of the janissary units is illustrated by a story told of a rebellion that took place in Tlemcen, a city located about 500 kilometers/390 miles west of Algiers, and that was under Algerine rule.

A marabout (a holy man) in Tlemcen rose up and convinced his followers that it was time to throw off the hated Algerine yoke. He announced that he had received secret revelations from the Prophet Muhammad, who was angry to see their city under Algerine tyranny, and that the Prophet had given him the magical ability to protect his followers. The muskets of their enemies, he claimed, would misfire, and their swords would become blunt and useless.

This marabout gathered together a fighting force of no less than 10,000 men, all fanatically inspired by his preaching.

When word of this reached Algiers, a force of janissaries was sent to quell the rebellion.

Against the marabouts' 10,000 men, 1,200 janissaries marched out of Algiers.

When the two forces met, and the rebels saw how few the janissaries were, they roared in wild excitement and, with the marabout urging them on, surged forward in a great howling mass, like a human tsunami, intent on overwhelming their enemy.

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The janissaries, however, stood their ground and delivered withering volley after volley. Their harquebuses did not misfire, and their sabers did not grow dull.

The rebel tribesmen, stunned that their marabout's promises had failed to come true, broke and fled.

The janissaries captured the marabout, along with thirty or so of the ringleaders of the revolt. They flayed these men alive on the spot, stuffed the bloody skins with straw, and brought them back to Algiers to parade them on poles through the streets as a brutal warning.



As this story makes clear, janissaries were highly effective troops. In the early days, though, when the original 2,000 were sent to Algiers, they were not enough.

Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Sultan, was well aware of this. Located far from Istanbul, Algiers was part of the “wild west” of the Ottoman Empire. To keep the area pacified would require more than the janissary troops he had sent. He could not afford

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to send any more, though. Suleiman was in his mid-twenties at the time and had just ascended to the throne. He was busy trying to increase his empire. In total, he only had about 13,000 janissaries at his disposal. The 2,000 he sent to Algiers represented a significant portion of that force. He could not afford to send any more.

Algiers was too important lose, though. So the Sultan did something drastic, something that went against nearly 300 years of janissary tradition. He announced that any volunteers who went to Algiers to fight in the cause would receive all the freedoms and privileges—and the pay—granted to the janissaries. They would, in other words, become janissaries overnight.

This was a seriously radical step that changed forever the composition of the Algerine janissary force.

No fewer than 4,000 volunteers showed up, mostly from Anatolia (modern geographical Turkey).

Upon arrival, each new recruit received the following:

- a woolen blanket
- a canvas shirt
- a sleeveless jacket
- a pair of pants
- a red sash that served as a belt
- a cap
- a coat
- a pair of shoes (the heels of which were shod with rounded inserts of iron, rather like horseshoes)
- a sword
- an arquebus

After training—far less training that janissaries customarily received—the new recruits became janissaries.

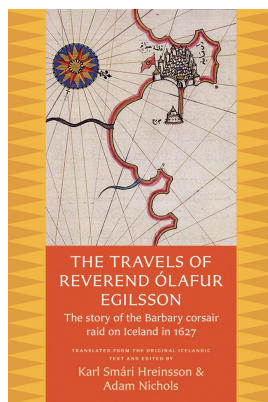
Just like that.

It was a most profound change. The Algerine janissaries were now no longer slaves—of however exalted a status—for the 4,000 new recruits were Muslims, and the Koran expressly forbids the enslavement of Muslims.

This morphing of the janissaries into something other than the traditional, homogenous force of ex-Christian *devşirme* slaves was beginning to happen elsewhere in the empire—it was in the air, so to speak, as change often is—but nowhere at this time did it occur with such sudden and sweeping effect as in Algiers.

And once started, there was no going back.

For more on the janissaries of Algiers, see the next post in this series [here](#) in this blog.



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JANISSARIES IN ALGIERS – PART 4

AUGUST 16, 2021 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of Janissaries in Algiers – Parts 1, 2, 3. If you haven't done so already, it's best

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The force of 2,000 janissaries originally sent to Algiers were ordered there to support Hayreddin Barbarossa and secure his position as ruler of that city—which in turn secured Algiers as a part of the larger Ottoman Empire.

They were performing the traditional janissary mission: supporting the Sultan's interests.

That all began to change when the janissary ranks were swelled by the 4,000 volunteers. Two thirds of the Algerine janissaries were now freemen. Not only did this alter the composition of the janissary force itself; it also altered the process by which the Algerine janissary ranks were maintained. Algerine janissaries were no longer simply slaves—albeit high status slaves—and new recruits were no longer gathered up in *devşirme* raids. This meant that the Sultan no longer had direct control of the recruitment process. Instead, the Algerine janissaries became as sort of all-volunteer military force.

Over the decades, their numbers swelled. Volunteers continued to appear from other part of the Ottoman Empire, but more and more the source of new recruits became local renegades—that is, Christians who had renounced their religion and become Muslims. Joining the janissary ranks became a sort of default career path for newly converted Muslims in Algiers. It provided them not only gainful employment but also a stable salary—since janissaries, remember, were full-time professional soldiers paid on a regular basis.

Here is one example of how this played out.

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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Here in this blog, back in November, 2018, I published a series of posts on a Barbary corsair captain—a Greek renegade—named Calafat Hassan Reis who was captured in a battle with European ships and held prisoner in Naples.

Here is an excerpt from the 2018 blog post:

When Calafat Hassan Reis's wife heard what had happened to her husband, she went straight to the Divan—the ruling council of Algiers—and demanded that they find a captive in Algiers of sufficient rank and importance so that he could be exchanged for her husband. Calafat Hassan Reis was one of the foremost corsair captains in Algiers at this time, and the Divan readily agreed.

The captive they settled on was Don Pedro de Carvajal, a Spanish gentleman of high rank who had been taken by Algerine corsairs while sailing from Spain to Oran. Naples was a Spanish possession at this time, so choosing a high-ranking Spanish captive made perfect sense.

Negotiations were begun to swap Don Pedro for Calafat Hassan Reis.

Things progressed slowly, though—very slowly—and after four years there was still no resolution. Calafat Hassan Reis remained chained up in a Naples dungeon; Don Pedro remained a slave in Algiers.

And then a report arrived in Algiers that Calafat Hassan Reis had been executed in Naples by being burned alive at the stake. The news spread quickly throughout Algiers, causing widespread fury. Calafat Hassan Reis's wife, along with her parents, marched

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to the Divan at the head of an angry mob to demand justice. Since Calafat Hassan Reis had been burned at the stake, they said, Don Pedro must also suffer the same fate.

The members of the Divan agreed to their demand. Moreover, they offered up a second Spanish Gentleman—a man named Don Juan—as well. It was a way to send a message to their Spanish enemy: if the Spanish dared to roast an Algiers corsair captain alive, the Algiers authorities would roast two Spanish gentlemen in return. Don Pedro and Don Juan were immediately seized and imprisoned in preparation for their execution.

When the appointed day arrived, Don Pedro and Don Juan were taken from their prison and hauled through the streets in chains to the place of their execution. A great crowd followed, shouting angrily.

Don Pedro was to be burned first. He was shackled to an upright stake and a pyre of deadwood built up around him. As the wood was set ablaze, the crowd pressed forward, taunting him. Don Pedro held his head high and recited his prayers—until the flames and the smoke stifled his words.

Then it was Don Juan's turn.

Don Juan, however, had seen enough. He cried out and raised his finger theatrically towards heaven—the recognized symbol that a person wished to become a Muslim. He was immediately freed of his chains and paraded back through the city streets to the Palace of the Pasha (the Ottoman Governor of Algiers). To general applause, the Pasha issued Don Juan new clothing and enrolled him among the janissaries, so that he would draw pay as they did.

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And so Don Juan became a renegade and took up a new life in Algiers.

This process of enrolling new renegades directly into the janissary ranks became more and more common. Occasionally, the process took on an almost surreal aspect. Look at the following, for example:

A few years ago, among the several lions that had been tamed, and who wandered through the streets of Algiers, there was one who entered the courtyard where the Divan was in session. There, in front of the whole assembly, this lion threw himself at the feet of the Pasha and began to flatter him, roaring in a pitiful manner, as if he had seemed to be complaining. The Pasha immediately judged that this animal was hungry, and that having no particular owner (he was sleeping in the streets), no one had taken care to give him food.

For this reason, with the consent of the Divan, the Pasha ordered that in the future this lion would have the pay of a janissary, to be used for his food.

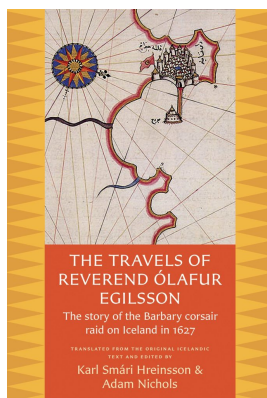
A month later, the lion died. His corpse was brought to the Divan, so that he could be buried with proper ceremony. He was carried by four janissaries in honor of his having been one of them and having drawn pay like them.

The Algerine janissaries had come a long way from the original elite force of slaves devoted entirely to the Sultan.

For more on the janissaries of Algiers, see the next post in this series here in this blog.

For those who may be interested...

The story of the lion who became an honorary janissary comes from Pierre Dan's *Histoire de Barbarie*, 1649 edition, p. 99.



The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson

The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627

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JANISSARIES IN ALGIERS – PART 5

AUGUST 9, 2021 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of Janissaries in Algiers – Parts 1 – 4. If you haven't done so already, it's best to

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read those posts before continuing on here.)

The janissaries of Algiers, remember, were professional soldiers—a professional army. Like the modern professional fighting forces we are familiar with, janissaries had a rigid formal rank structure and a formal method for being promoted through the ranks.

Algerine janissaries were organized into units of ten or twenty men (apparently, the size varied). These men, known as *yoldachs*, were the equivalent of privates (the word *yoldach* is also sometimes used simply to designate janissaries in general). There was an ascending ladder of janissary ranks, but the main ones were the *Odabaşı*, (the equivalent of Lieutenant), the *Bölükbaşı* (the equivalent of Captain), and the *Yáyabaşı* (the equivalent of Colonel). The supreme commander of the janissaries was the *Agha*.

The Divan—the governing council of Algiers—was essentially a janissary affair. It consisted of the city's *Yáyabaşıs*, *Bölükbaşıs*, and *Odabaşıs* and was presided over by the *Agha*. The *Aghas* were elected to two-month terms.

Promotion in the Algerine janissaries was based on time in service. So in theory, any simple *yoldach* who put in enough years of service could eventually become an *Agha*.

Like all professional soldiers, janissaries drew regular pay.

When men joined the Algerine janissaries, they were given a uniform, a sword, and a harquebus (a matchlock musket). They were also automatically enrolled on the payment list and received their pay

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every two months—in cash, i.e., in silver coins. Each year, the *yoldach's* bi-monthly pay went up until, after fifteen years, it plateaued. Officers' pay was, of course, higher than that of the simple *yoldach*. Not only did Algerine janissaries receive regular bi-monthly pay; if they lasted long enough to be promoted through the ranks, they also received a pension when they retired from active-duty service.

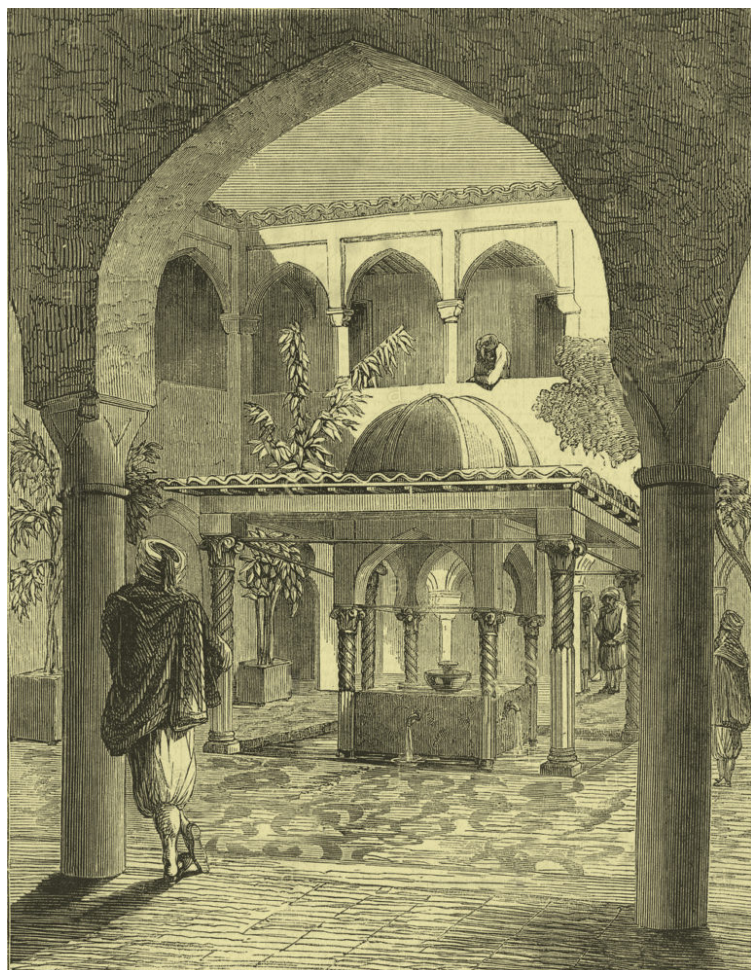
As well as this regular pay, janissaries received a daily ration of four loaves of bread. They were also entitled to a one-third discount on any meat they bought in the city. They were also exempt from all taxes, and they were not subject to the regular laws of Algiers. If a janissary committed any sort of 'crime,' he was judged internally by his superiors.

The Algerine janissaries lived communally in large barracks—as is common with professional militaries the world over. There were seven or eight of these barracks in Algiers, housing between 700 – 800 to upwards of 2,000 janissaries each. They had a reputation for being well built, well organized, very clean places. It was common for janissary officers to own slaves, and the work required to keep the janissary barracks in good order was done in large part by those slaves.

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Janissary barracks

Chains hung across the entrance doors to the janissary barracks. By tradition, if a person being chased by the city authorities was able to grab hold of one of these chains, he was immune from seizure. Like churches, janissary barracks provided sanctuary.

The combination of a regular cash salary and the various perks that accompanied their position made the Algerine janissaries elite citizens.

A janissary could walk into a shop, help himself to what he wanted, and walk out again—and there was precious little the shop owner could do about it. He might try lodging a complaint with the Divan, but that was unlikely to produce much of a result. And he could not physically restrain the janissary. By law in Algiers, people were forbidden to lay hands on a

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janissary. The official punishment was severe: amputation of the offending hand.

Janissaries not only constituted the elites of the city. They were also the most formidable power block.

Algerine power politics was complicated. Nominally, Algiers was an Ottoman Regency. That is, the city was part of the Ottoman Empire and owed allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan. The reality was more complicated than that.

The janissaries had originally been sent to Algiers, remember, to shore up the rule of Hayreddin Barbarossa, whom the Sultan had appointed Beylerbey. Within a few decades, however, the janissaries had virtually taken over the city and were appointing (and manipulating) the Beylerbeys themselves. This period of the “rule” of the Beylerbeys lasted a little over seventy years (1515-1587).

By then, the Ottoman Sultans were getting fed up. Algiers was on the fringes of the Ottoman Empire, and so difficult to control. They were willing to allow the city a certain amount of autonomy, but the janissaries had virtually stopped sending tribute to Istanbul. *That*, the Sultans were not willing to accept.

So starting in 1587, the Sultans sent Pashas (Governors) to Algiers. These Pashas served three-year terms. They had a great deal of authority—they were, after all, the Sultan’s direct representative—but they had little real power. The janissaries continued to be the major power block in the city. This was partly because of the obvious fact that they had the monopoly on brute physical force, since nobody else in the city was armed and organized as they were.

They also had another hold over the pashas, though.

Pashas essentially bought their positions, lavishing bribes on the appropriate officials in Istanbul to gain their position. They did this because three years as Pasha in Algiers could make a man very rich. The Pasha got a direct cut of all the slaves and all the booty the Algerine corsairs brought into the city. He also got to collect a variety of taxes. Pashas typically spent their three years milking these revenue streams for all they were worth.

But there was a complication.

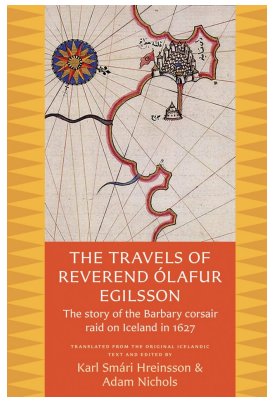
Pashas were personally responsible for paying the entire janissary corps of Algiers.

If a Pasha was unable to pay the janissaries on time, the consequences could be severe. A contingent of janissaries would arrest and imprison him until the payment arrived. They might torture him to encourage him to speed up the process. If it looked like he would be unable to pay, they might even execute him—they executed one Pasha by blowing him out of the muzzle of a large cannon—as a way to encourage future Pashas to take the issue of janissary pay seriously.

As the above should make clear, janissaries were the true rulers of Algiers. They held and wielded the power, both physically (their armed might) and institutionally (their dominance of the Divan).

Like every group who wields power, janissaries were jealous of their position and their privileges, and they were prone to abusing those they held power over. On one famous occasion, this abuse gave rise to a bloody rebellion—of the janissaries' own children.

For the story of this rebellion, see the next post in this series here in this blog.



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JANISSARIES IN ALGIERS – PART 4 »

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Corsairs & Captives

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JANISSARIES IN ALGIERS – PART 6

AUGUST 3, 2021 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of Janissaries in Algiers – Parts 1 – 5. If you haven't done so already, it's best to

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By the late 1620s, the janissaries had been in Algiers for the better part of a century. This had given them time to become a permanent part of the city's population.

Janissaries were not supposed to marry. If they did, they lost their place in the janissary barracks—that is, they lost their free housing—and their daily bread ration was stopped. Despite these penalties, however, a significant number of janissaries married local Algerine woman—or at least slept with them and got the women pregnant.

After a hundred years of this, there were quite a few sons of janissaries in Algiers. They were collectively referred to as Kouloughlis—a term derived from the Turkish word *kuloğlu*, from *kul*, meaning “servant” or “slave” (one of the terms for the janissaries was *Kapıkulu Ocağı*, meaning “servants (or slaves) of the hearth” in Turkish) and *oğlu* meaning “son of.”

By the 1620s, the Kouloughlis were frustrated young (and not so young) men.

The Algerine janissaries no longer filled their ranks through the *devşirme* system, and they were a lot looser about whom they permitted to become *yoldachs*. But they rejected their own sons. Beyond this, the Kouloughlis were treated as second-class citizens in general, and while some of them managed to gain entry into the officer class of the janissaries, most found themselves unable to get prominent positions in either Algiers' Ottoman/Turkish government or in the city's massive corsair enterprise.

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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Exactly why the janissaries treated their own children this way is unclear, though it may have been a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy situation: the more the Kouloughlis were cut out of positions of influence and power, the more dissatisfied they grew and the more they agitated and plotted; but the more the Kouloughlis agitated and plotted, the more suspicious the janissary leaders became of them and so cut them out of positions of influence and power.

Whatever the cause, the Kouloughlis felt this ostracization to be an outrageous affront. Algiers was *their* city. They were sons of the janissary elite. They believed they deserved more—much more. Their outrage grew so strong (and their chances of ever improving their position in the city's hierarchical power structure were so dismal) that they decided desperate measures were call for.

They moved from simple agitation to planning an actual coup.

Here is a brief description of how it began: “One day, some of the Kouloughlis were seated together, drinking wine. One of them said, ‘We have now become as powerful as the Turks themselves. It should be easy for us to bring them down.’” As seems so often to be the case with secret plots hatched in taverns, the Kouloughlis were overheard: “One of the Turks heard this and warned the members of the Divan, urging them to be on guard, since the Kouloughlis wanted to overthrow them.”

The janissaries on the Divan reacted to this news—which proved all their worst suspicions to be well founded—by devising a political solution. Here is an explanation of the situation by a European observer:

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The Turks [the members of the Divan] hearing that the Kouloughlis, their own children, plotted against them, banished all of them who participated in the Divan as Bulla Bashees [*Bölükbaşıs*] and Odds Bashees [*Odabaşıs*]. The Turks performed this with great subtlety. No word passed in the city of their suspicions, nor did the Kouloughlis have any idea that their so secret plots had been discovered. All rested private until the next meeting of the Divan, when sixty of the most prominent Kouloughlis were banished from the city. Strange it is that the Turks should banish a faction more powerful than themselves in number, in friends, and in estates, and of equal dignities, all speaking one language; yet those banished departed at the Turks' pleasure, without demanding the cause of their offence.

The conniving Turks first ordained that the banished Kouloughlis need go no further than to Bugea, the next port town to the east of Algiers. But the commissions given the janissary Captains to whose charge the banished Kouloughlis were committed, contained other orders: to transport the Kouloughlis to Tunis, much further distant.

After this, all rested without clamor until the next meeting of the Divan was called, during which two hundred more Kouloughlis were banished. At this, the citizens and natives of the city murmured, but dare not make complaints of their griefs. They, however, neglected their customary course of trade. The Turks by proclamation commanded all men to open their shops, to buy and to sell, and not to have any misapprehensions regarding their intents or doings, past or to come, betwixt them and their children, for such things were merely differences amongst themselves. They also gave hopes to the banished that in a short time they would be recalled to Algiers and restored to their former dignities.

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At the third meeting of the Divan, five hundred more Kouloughlis were banished, and at the next meeting, all the rest. In total, 1,574 men, chiefest in the city for esteem, in that they were descended from the ancient Turks who conquered that country, were sent away.

During this time, no word reached Algiers about how the banished Kouloughlis were being transported to far-distant Tunis rather than Bugea. By the time the truth came out, the Kouloughlis realized that all hopes of returning in a fair way to their city had been dashed.

By this point, not only had the Kouloughlis been outmaneuvered and ejected from Algiers, but their property had also been confiscated:

The Divan banished all the Kouloughlis from the city. The Kouloughlis and their women and children, except for some women who chose to stay behind, were driven out by the Turks to the city of Tunis, 100 miles away. The Turks confiscated all of the banished Kollórar's wealth, their cattle and sheep, and all their lands.

This news reached the Kouloughlis in Tunis, and some of them traveled by road to Algiers to see for themselves if the Turks had indeed taken everything that once was theirs and placed new masters in their fields. Seeing this to be true, the Kouloughlis then killed and injured many Christina slaves who worked these fields. Word of this spread throughout Algiers. The Turks sent soldiers to kill the Kouloughlis and bring back their heads. The soldiers found a few of

the Kouloughlis and killed them and then returned, exhibiting twenty-four severed heads and claiming that all were from the Kouloughlis. But the rumor was that some of the heads belonged to their own men.

The stage was now set for a major confrontation between the Kouloughlis and the Divan—between the sons and the fathers.

To see how this confrontation played out, go to the next post here in this blog.

For those who may be interested...

The first quotation (about the Kouloughlis drunkenly planning their coup) and the third one (about the Kouloughlis reprisal raid and the twenty-four severed heads) come from Chapter XXXIII of Björn Jónsson's, *Tyrkjaráns-Saga*, (*The Turkish Raid Saga*), a book written (in Icelandic) in 1643.

The second quotation (about the Divan's Machiavellian handling of the Kouloughli situation) comes from the first chapter of Francis Knight's *A Relation of Seven Years Slavery Under the Turks Of Algiers, Suffered by an English Captive Merchant*, a book first published in 1640.

The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson

The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627

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JANISSARIES IN ALGIERS – PART 7

JULY 26, 2021 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of Janissaries in Algiers – Parts 1 – 6. If you haven't done so already, it's best to

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January 9, 2023

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read those posts before continuing on here.)

As we saw in the last post here in this blog, after the banishments of the Kouloughlis (the sons of janissaries and Algerine women) and the confiscation of their lands and goods, the stage was set for a major confrontation between them and the rulers of Algiers—the majority of whom were janissaries.

A band of determined Kouloughlis crept back into the city. Their plan was to take over the Kasbah—the fortress at the top of the city—and use the resources it contained (huge amounts of gunpowder and shot) to launch their rebellion.

Here is a contemporary European description of how the things played out.

In the year 1632, in midsummer, fifteen Kouloughlis disguised in women's clothing approached the Kasbah. The gate guard of the fortress blocked these fifteen counterfeit women from entering, but they demanded the key to the fortress from him. He dared not deny them. Some of them then walked up along the wall and took off their disguises. The gate guard saw this and realized that they were Kouloughlis who had been expelled from the city

The story circulated throughout the town that the fortress of the Kasbah was occupied and that something secretive was going on. Initially, people thought some Christian slaves had entered the fortress and had taken it over. This rumor circulated quickly, and everyone locked their doors in panic.

Then the truth got out that the Kouloughlis had taken the Kasbah. The members of the Divan [the ruling council of Algiers] received this news. The

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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leaders conferred together and then went to the Kasbah.

The Kouloughlis said to them, “Now we have power over you Turks, you thieves who stole our property and our women and children. Now we will possess this place!”

The members of the Council replied, with great humility, “We will reward you if you promise us that you will return the fortress to us unspoiled. Everything will be returned to you, and you shall live as our welcome neighbors.”

But the Kouloughlis answered, “We know your lies and cunning ways too well. We will not heed your tempting words, and we will not surrender. Instead, now that we are here, we will commit an act that will long be remembered.”

They then went down to the powder magazine in the cellar of the fortress and tried to haul up some of the powder kegs, but they could only fetch one, and only with great difficulty. Two others they could not shift at all. After that, they set alight the gunpowder in the magazine and blew up the fortress, creating a crater that was thirty fathoms or more across. Seventy houses were destroyed inside the confines of the fortress. Outside, well over a hundred were wrecked.

The fortress went up in a massive explosion that was astonishing to hear, throwing large stones far into the air which smashed houses when they hit the ground, for some were so large it took three men to cart them away. These stones also fell on croplands and pastures. Over a thousand people were killed. The explosion tore bodies into bits, and heads and arms and other body parts came raining down.

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Out of the fifteen Kollórar, four survived. They were bound and tortured. Many small holes were cut into their bodies and fire was inserted into the incisions. The Kouloughlis were then taken out of the city. Their final torment was to be thrown over the wall onto iron hooks. They hung there, impaled, until they died. One of them lived on for three days, until a Turk shot him.

The fortress was then rebuilt.

Here is another European description of the obliteration of the Kasbah:

The Kouloughli defendants, feeling desperate, and unable to make any further resistance, ignited twenty thousand quintals of powder, blew a piece of ordnance out of the fortress to the fish gate, a mile away, spoiled many houses, and would have destroyed the whole city, except that the Kasbah is situated atop a stupendous mountain, with the city lying below it, and the nature of explosive powder is to rise upwards.

The sky was darkened with smoke and dust, and nothing heard but clamors in the streets, as if the Day of Judgement had arrived.

A quintal was the equivalent of 100 pounds (45 kilos). So according to this estimate, the embattled Kouloughlis detonated something like 2,000,000 pounds (900,000 kilos) of gunpowder.

This seems an unrealistically huge amount of gunpowder, and it is likely an exaggeration. But,

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given the massive scale of the explosion, however many actual pounds/kilos of gunpowder the Kouloughlis set alight, it was a *lot*.

Here is one final European assessment of the failed Kouloughli rebellion:

A dozen years ago, the Kouloughlis launched a rebellion and, in an attempt to take control of the city and the state, captured the Kasbah. They were besieged by both Turks and renegades, many of them fathers of the rebels.

The Kouloughlis' resistance was so stubborn that they blew up the Kasbah. Those who survived lost their heads. In my own time, some of these severed heads still decorated the walls around the Bab al-Oued gate—a pitiful relic of paternal revenge, for most of the besieged and the besiegers were fathers and sons, uncles and nephews, or at least first cousins.

Since that time, the Kouloughlis have had no voice in the government of Algiers, do not receive any public pay, and are permitted to join corsair expeditions only on the condition that they receive no wages or salaries but just a simple share in the common profits.

It was a century or more before the Kouloughlis were able to resume their former place in Algerine society.

Moral of the story?

Don't mess with Algerine janissaries.

For those who may be interested...

The first description of the occupation and destruction of the Kasbah comes from Chapter XXXIV of Björn Jónsson's, *Tyrkjaráns-Saga*, (*The Turkish Raid Saga*), a book written (in Icelandic) in 1643.

The second description of the Kasbah's obliteration (the one containing the estimate of the amount of gunpowder that exploded) comes from Francis Knight's *A Relation of Seven Yeares Slaverie Under the Turkes of Argeire, suffered by an English Captive Merchant*, published in 1640, p. 3.

The final European assessment of the failed Kouloughli rebellion comes from René du Chastelet des Boys' *l'Odyssée, ou diversité d'aventures, rencontres et voyages en Europe Asie et Afrique* (*The Odyssey, or Diverse Adventures, Encounters, and Voyages in Europe, Asia, and Africa*), published in 1665, pp. 63-64.

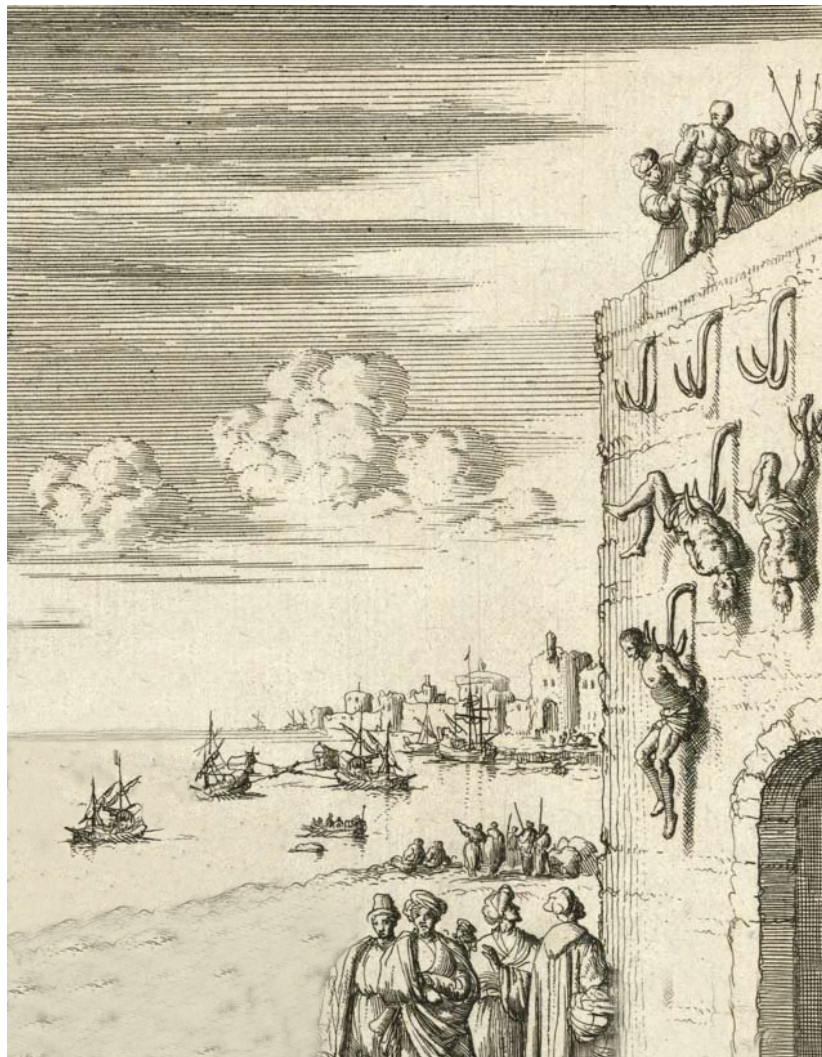
Finally...

The form of execution the Kouloughlis suffered when they were "thrown over the wall onto iron hooks " was known as ganching (the term derives from the Spanish/Portuguese word for hook: "gancho"). Here is a description:

"They have large hooks of serpent-tongued iron, which they call ganches in Lingua Franca, and which are set into the walls. Upon these, they hang those whom they wish to put to death. First, they strip the victims naked and bind their hands behind their backs. Then they push them off the top of the wall so that they fall and are entangled upon the hooks,

sometimes caught in the belly, sometimes in the shoulder or by some other part of the body. Thus they die slowly" (Pierre Dan *Histoire de Barbarie*, p. 414).

Below, is a seventeenth century depiction of ganching.



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The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627

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OF PIRACY, PROFIT, AND PRUDENCE — PART 1

JUNE 24, 2018 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

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In its heyday as a corsair capital, the city of Algiers had one major economic driver: piracy. Legally speaking, Algerian corsairs were actually privateers rather than pirates. That is, they were officially authorized by the government of their city to attack 'enemy' shipping and coastal areas, and any captives or booty they returned with had to be shared out in a carefully prescribed manner both with the city authorities and among themselves. None of this altered the fact, though, that what they were engaged in was for all intents and purposes piracy: the violent seizure of people and property.

There was an element of *jihad* to the Algerian corsair enterprise—the *corso*, as it was sometimes referred to—but, above all, it was a business, an extremely profitable business that everybody wanted in on. There was a time in the history of America when, if a young man wanted to go out into the world and 'seek his fortune,' he was told "Go west, young man. Go west." If a young man in Algiers wanted to seek his fortune, he went to sea in corsair ships.

There is a story about one such young man.

His name was Mustaffa, and he was a Turkish soldier stationed in Algiers. In fact, he wasn't really so young anymore. He had been on numerous corsair expeditions, serving as part of the assault force that all Algerian corsair ships employed. Corsair captains preferred subterfuge whenever possible rather than direct frontal assault, but if subterfuge failed, they sent in the soldiers to swarm the ships they attacked and overwhelm the crews. It was, of course, dangerous work. Mustaffa had done it for some years, risking his life in the hopes of earning enough money from his share of the spoils to enable him to finance a better, more secure future for himself.

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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In order for his modest share to ever be large enough to enable him to change his life, though, any ship he served on would have had to take a monstrously profitable prize—a Spanish galleon filled with silver and gold returning from the New World, for instance.

For Mustaffa, nothing of the sort had happened. The *corso* was a game of chance as much as anything. In the vast expanse of the Mediterranean (vast if you're in a sailing ship or an oared galley) you had to run into the right ships at the right time in order to be able to capture them. Corsair captains who did so were considered lucky. Crew flocked to them. Investors lined up to bankroll their excursions.

Mustaffa had never had the luck to sail with such a captain.

Over the years, however, he had managed to amass 200 pieces of eight. Though that sum was nowhere near enough to enable him to embark on a new life, it was still a respectable amount of money.

Enough to buy a small ship.

With a ship of his own, he would be a captain, and a captain earned 50% of the take from any successful corsair expedition.

So Mustaffa decided to take the risk. In the spring of 1639, he bought a small ship, so small that it didn't even have decks. It was a solid, seaworthy little craft all the same, though. His 200 pieces of eight were enough to both buy her outright and outfit her for a cruise, including not only rigging and tackle and victuals for the voyage, but also muskets—the boat was too small to mount cannon, but his crew needed to be armed.

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Mooring his new ship in the harbor near the Mole (as the long breakwater that enclosed the Algiers harbor was called), Mustaffa raised a flag indicating that he was looking for crew. Soon enough, he had attracted a collection of sixteen men, both Muslims and *renegados*, who were willing to sail with him for a share of any booty they took.

They left Algiers at the beginning of the summer—the *corso* season—and sailed westwards across the Mediterranean and through the Strait of Gibraltar. These were dangerous waters, patrolled by Spanish warships, but they manage to slip through. Then they began to cruise along the Spanish coast near Cadiz, looking for prey.

They got lucky.

By chance, there happened to be a group of merchants in Cadiz at that very moment who were trying to smuggle a considerable quantity of silver out of the country. During this period in Spain, it was a capital offense to export silver without a royal warrant. So the merchants had to do it clandestinely, making secret arrangements with an English ship to smuggle sixty bars of silver onto it.

The plan was that a hired band of eighteen men, armed with swords and four muskets, would convey the load of silver ingots quietly through the streets in the dead of night, load it aboard a boat waiting in the harbor, and convey it out to the English ship.

These men collected the silver, hauled it across town without incident (and without being discovered by the King's Officers of Justice), and loaded it into the waiting boat. Then, in dim pre-dawn light, they set off across the harbor and out into the choppy waters beyond, in search of the English ship.

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Mustaffa and his crew spotted them as they emerged from the calmer waters of the harbor. He brought his ship close and ordered his men to fire a volley. The Spaniards immediately returned fire. Mustaffa realized, however, that they had far fewer muskets than his own crew. So he kept firing, making multiple passes just within musket range, raking the Spanish boat with volley after volley.

After an hour of this, they had killed four of the Spanish and wounded quite a number of others.

The Spanish surrendered.

Mustaffa and his crew had been desperate. Despite all their cruising of the Spanish coast, they had so far been unable to take a single prize. They had sustained their attack on the small Spanish boat partly because its size made it vulnerable, but also because they felt they had to take some sort of prize, even if it didn't amount to much.

So they boarded the Spanish boat without much in the way of expectations. Weary and still with the jitters from the fighting, they quickly took the surviving occupants of the boat prisoner, binding them so they couldn't cause any trouble, and began transferring them to their own small ship.

And then found the silver.

See *Of Piracy, Profit, and Prudence — Part 2* for the rest of Mustaffa's story.

Corsairs & Captives

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OF PIRACY, PROFIT, AND PRUDENCE — PART 2

JUNE 22, 2018 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of *Of Piracy, Profit, and Prudence — Part 1*. If you haven't done so already, it's best to read that post before continuing on here.)

Sixty bars of silver was a *lot* of silver. Mustaffa and his crew must have stood there on the rocking boat

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staring at the stacked, dully gleaming ingots in utter astonishment. After which, no doubt, they all sent heartfelt prayers of thanks to Allah.

With a prize like this, they didn't need to stay out any longer. They abandoned the Spanish boat and let it drift, with the dead sprawled stiffly in it. Then they raised sail and headed out, threading their way safely through the Strait of Gibraltar and onwards until they reached the harbor at Algiers.

Dividing up booty was a formal process. The Basha (the Ottoman Governor of the City) was entitled to one eighth of all captives and merchandise, and any captive ships brought into the city were his and his alone. There were also port taxes and fees.

Mustaffa would have paraded his captives through the streets to the Basha's residence, for, by long custom, the Basha got first pick of any captives. It wouldn't have made much of a parade, though, compared with what larger expeditions could produce: Mustaffa and his small crew and a dozen or so limping captives, some of whom were suffering from musket-shot wounds. It's likely that they didn't generate much of a crowd. It's likely, too, that the Basha himself didn't pay much attention or have much in the way of expectations. After all, Mustaffa was returning from his first *corso* expedition, in a small boat, leading a paltry number of captives. The most the Basha could have expected for his one-eighth share would have been perhaps two captives, in bad shape, possibly wounded.

And then he—and everybody else—learned about the silver.

Mustaffa became an overnight sensation.

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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As captain of his own ship, remember, he was entitled to half of all the proceeds from the expedition. The other half was divided among the crew. On larger ships, where the crew was composed of men with varying tasks—soldiers, gunners, seamen, carpenters, etc.—there were elaborate formulas that determined what share each sort of crewmember was eligible for. In a small ship like Mustaffa's, no doubt the crew received equal one-sixteenth shares.

All this was calculated after the Basha had taken his one-eighth share of everything—both captives and silver.

When it was all over, Mustaffa's share amounted to a value of thirty thousand pieces of eight. That may not sound like a huge amount by modern standards, but it was the equivalent of about \$1,000,000 today.

Captain Mustaffa had become a seriously wealthy man.

That was how he was now referred to: Mustaffa Reis (Captain Mustaffa). He was everybody's darling. The city's important merchants all wanted to marry their eligible daughters to him. Freelance crew all wanted to serve on his next expedition. The wealthy backers who financed *corso* expeditions entertained him with sumptuous dinners, offering him ships and crew and seed money for his next cruise.

For Mustaffa had shown he possessed the one crucial quality that all successful corsair captains needed: luck.

Having demonstrated that, he could now launch an entirely different sort of life than he had first intended. He could become a corsair captain. If his

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luck held, he could become a *famous* corsair captain, celebrated by one and all, a man of wealth and importance.

If his luck held.

It was one of those watershed moments in a man's life. Two roads... One led to a life of excitement, danger, and, if he succeeded, riches and fame. The other led to a quiet life in a villa somewhere with a wife and children and, perhaps, a garden.

The wealthy backers were pressing him for a decision.

"Mustaffa," they said, one evening over dinner. "Allah has smiled upon you. Take our ship, pillage the infidels. Make us all rich."

Mustaffa leaned back, looking at them. They were well dressed men all, sleek and comfortable. Most had never set foot on the ships they financed. "As a soldier," he said to them, "I endangered my life many times. Now you are suggesting I do so again?"

"You are a lucky man," one of the wealthy backers said. "A brave man. The danger will be as nothing to you."

"Think of the fame!" one of the others said.

"You could become head of the Taifa," suggested a third (the Taifa was the official organization of Algerian corsair captains).

"You would become an important man!"

Mustaffa nodded. "All you say is true. A new life beckons me, a life of wealth and importance."

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“Yes!” the wealthy backers all agreed.

Mustaffa paused. “But... I have sufficient money now to maintain myself for as long as I live. Why should I go to sea again? I have endangered my life enough. I think I shall spend the rest of my days ashore and laugh at the dangers of the sea.”

Which is exactly what Mustaffa did.

He married the pretty daughter of a wealthy Morisco merchant and bought a small but elegant villa in the countryside outside the city. There he lived a quiet life with his wife and children, watching the sun rise and set and the seasons pass, with seldom a thought for the sea. He grew older; his beard whitened. Occasionally one of his old crew would visit. He would serve the man tea and they would reminisce about their famous exploit. And then the man would go, and Mustaffa would stroll through the green aisles of his garden, listening to the songbirds, until dinner was ready.

§§§

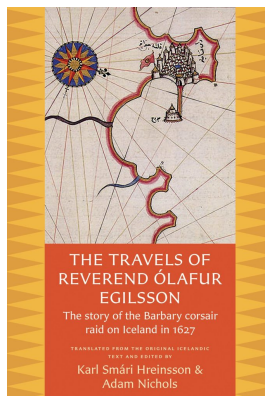
Mustaffa’s story is a reminder of something important: people are people. Barbary corsairs—like their European counterparts—practiced a violent profession that included armed robbery, abduction, and human trafficking. But they didn’t practice this profession because they were inherently evil people. They did it for... many reasons, some good, some bad. Such men were products of the time and place in which they lived.

This is not to say that armed robbery and human trafficking is excusable. But history, if it is to rise above the level of dry dates and lists of events, is about people, individual people and the lives they led. Those individual lives offer a means to understand the past in a direct way. More importantly, perhaps, they can act as a counterweight to overly simplistic broad generalizations about the past.

Barbary corsairs, like people everywhere, were people.

People, like people everywhere, are people

This story of the life of Mustaffa is based on Relation XXIV, “De la prudente retraite d’un corsair” (“Of the Prudent Retirement of a Corsair”), in Emanuel d’Aranda’s *Relation de la captivité et liberté du sieur Emanuel d’Aranda jadis esclave à Alger*, (*The Story of the Captivity and Liberation of Sir Emanuel d’Aranda, once a slave in Algiers*) published in 1656.



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THE NARRATIVE OF JOÃO DE CARVALHO MASCARENHAS – PART 1

JANUARY 2, 2023 • ADAM NICHOLS • CAPTIVES

Welcome to the beginning of a new year. The Chinese apparently have a saying that they trot out

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regularly for the (Chinese) New Year that translates into English as: Congratulations!—as in: Congratulations on having survived another year!

So congratulations, all you survivors.

And speaking of survivors... I thought I'd launch this year with excerpts from a captivity narrative written by a survivor—a Portuguese soldier named João de Carvalho Mascarenhas who endured five years as a slave in Algiers in the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Like a number of other European captives who survived enslavement and managed eventually to return home, Mascarenhas wrote a narrative describing his experiences. The Portuguese title of this book is:

Memorável relação da perda da Nao Conceição que os Turcos queymarão à vista da barra de Lisboa vários sucessos das pessoas, que nella cativarão, E descrição nova da Cidade de Argel & de seu governo & cousas muy notáveis acontecidas nestes ultimos annos de 1621 até 1626.

(Memorable Account of the Loss of the Ship Conceição that the Turks Burned in Sight of the Bar of Lisbon; Including the Successes of Several People Who Were Captured, Plus a New Description of the City of Algiers and of its Government and a Description of the Very Remarkable Things that Happened Between the Years 1621 and 1626.)

João Mascarenhas served as a soldier for the Portuguese crown in a wide variety of locations. By his own account, before he had reached the age of thirty, he had been to Brazil, Mozambique, various places along the east coast of Africa as far north as the shores of the Red Sea, the Middle East (where he saw the waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates

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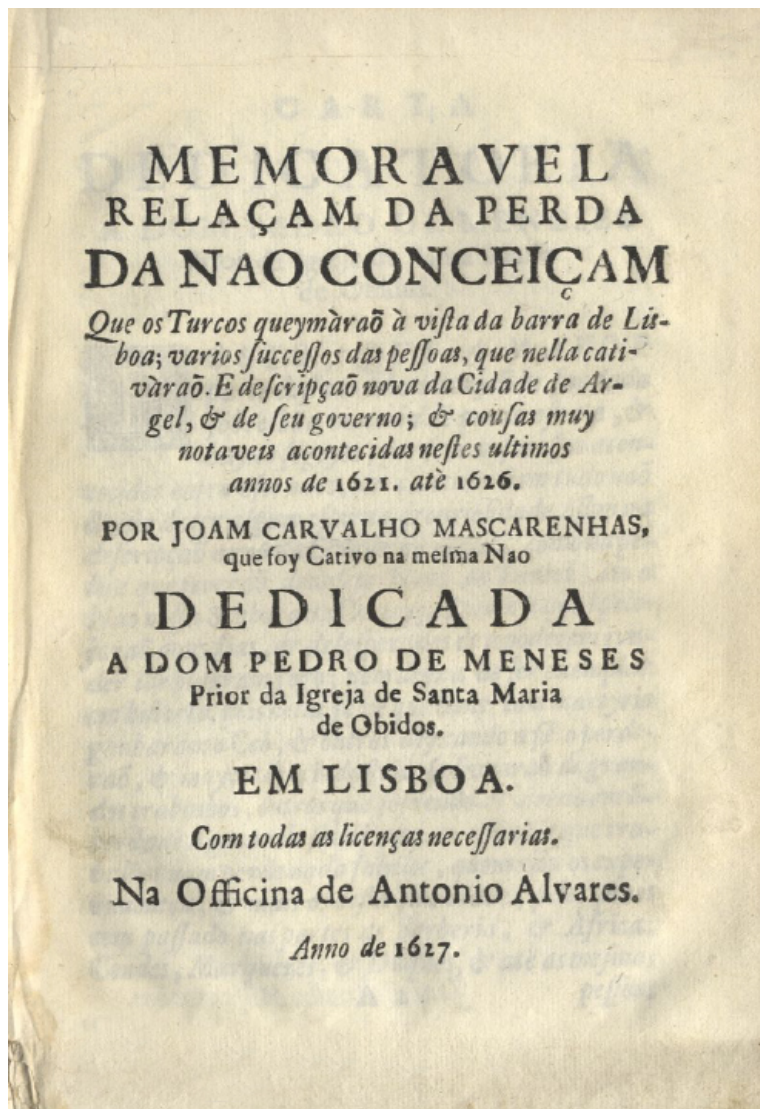


Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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Rivers), Persia, Mongolia, and India, where, among other places, he visited the Ganges.

In March of 1621, after completing a tour in the Portuguese controlled territory in India, Mascarenhas embarked from Goa on the *Nossa Senhora da Conceição* (Our Lady of Conception), a large carrack that was returning to Portugal. (See the map below for the location of Goa.)

Carracks were, for the time, very large ships—sort of the seventeenth century equivalent of a container ship. They had high ‘castles’ at the bow and stern, three or four masts, and capacious holds (in order to carry the various sorts of treasure the Portuguese had looted from the Indian subcontinent and the

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Spice Islands further east). (See the illustration of a carrack below.)



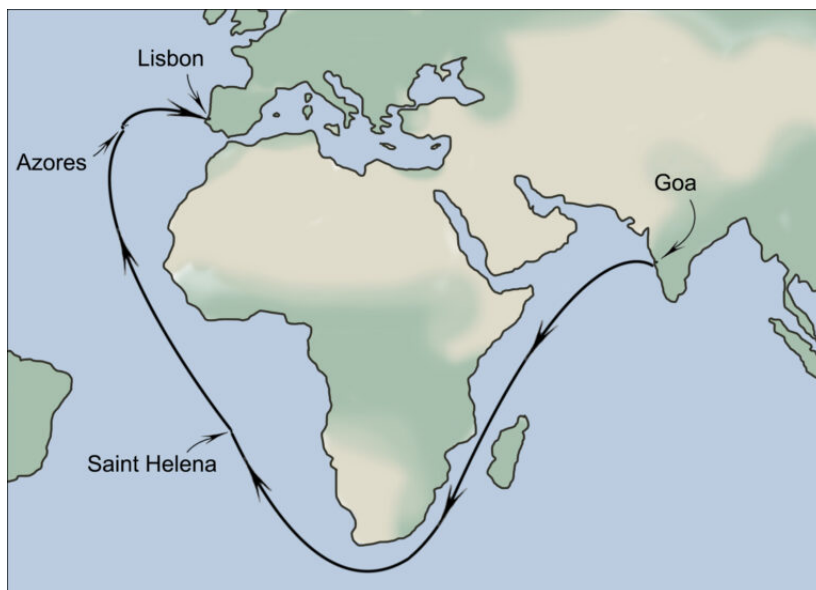
The voyage between India and Portugal was notoriously dangerous, for not only were the ships that attempted it threatened by storms *en route*, but since they were crammed with expensive merchandise—spices, silks, treasure of many sorts—they were the target of all manner of pirates as well. Some estimates are that ten to twenty percent of the Portuguese carracks that left India never made it to Portugal.

Moreover, conditions aboard ship were atrocious. Not only was the *Conceição* crammed with treasure; it was crammed with people as well. The vessel was perhaps 150 feet (45 meters) long by something like 30 feet (9 meters) wide (though it is hard to know for sure, since Mascarenhas didn't provide us with exact dimension). Into this rather modest-sized vessel (by modern standards), somewhere between six and eight hundred people—sailors, soldiers, and passengers—were packed. The voyage lasted slightly over seven months, during which time bad food, bad water, overcrowding, and disease took a ruthless toll.

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Despite the dangers and adverse conditions aboard, the *Conceição* made the voyage successfully, and Mascarenhas managed to survive it.

The route back to Portugal took the *Conceição* across the Arabian Sea, down the east coast of Africa and round the Cape of Good Hope on Africa's southern tip. From there, forced to follow the prevailing winds, it ended up at the island of Saint Helena (the place where Napoleon was incarcerated and died), where it stopped to replenish water and supplies and to make repairs (see the map below for locations of the places mentioned and for the sailing route).



Following the winds again, the *Conceição* headed for the Azores. While anchored there, the ship's captain received a letter informing him that a fleet of Algerine corsair ships was cruising the Portuguese coast, but that a squadron of Portuguese ships, under the command of Dom Antonio de Ataide, was in position to escort the *Conceição* safely into Lisbon harbor.

The *Conceição* left the Azores and sailed to the Portuguese coast, arriving in the waters near Lisbon in early October. They couldn't find the Portuguese

fleet, and the wind was weak and contrary, and they struggled to make headway, sailing through the night. Just before dawn, they heard the sound of voices ahead in the darkness along with the creaking of ships. They waited for the light of dawn, hoping to see the Portuguese fleet.

The gray radiance of morning, however, revealed a nasty surprise.

At this point, it's best to let João de Carvalho Mascarenhas tell the story himself.

To my knowledge, the *Memorável relação da perda da Nao Conceição* has never been translated into English before.

So here, for the very first time in English, is the story of João de Carvalho Mascarenhas:

By midnight, we were close to Lisbon, and towards the end of the second watch [i.e., close to 4:00 AM] we heard the sound of people talking ahead, as if our ship had been anchored in a city harbor. Believing that they were in the middle of Dom Antonio de Ataíde's fleet, the *Conceição's* crew joyfully set about preparing the ship to drop anchor at Lisbon.

As day broke, they discovered seventeen large ships of thirty to forty guns each. Though they saw clearly that they did not belong to our fleet, they imagined that they were ships laden with salt which had come from Setubal [located about 50 miles/80 kilometers sailing distance south of Lisbon].

These ships, however, were Turkish [i.e., they were Barbary corsair ships].

As soon as the Turks were informed by the Christian sailors they had with them that this ship that had so suddenly appeared was a carrack from India, they held a council, put their boats in the sea to warn each other, deployed their battle flags, and, protected by their shields, formed themselves into battle order.

They fired a warning shot from downwind.

In our naivety, since we had not yet fully grasped what was happening, we kept our illusions—because we could not believe that there could be so many enemies so close to home. Our ship's captain ordered the flag lowered, but it was quickly hoisted up again when it was understood from their insolence that these ships were enemies.

We fired at their flagship, and the captain of that ship, as soon as he saw that we had no intention of surrendering, took in his mainsails and reefed his spritsails, keeping only the topsails and the mizzen sails. The other ships made the same arrangements, with the intention of attacking our ship and boarding it.

For the next installment of the story of João Mascarenhas, see the next post in [this blog](#).

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THE NARRATIVE OF JOÃO DE CARVALHO MASCARENHAS – PART 2

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This week, we continue with the narrative of João de Carvalho Mascarenhas, the Portuguese soldier who was captured at sea in 1621 by corsairs from Algiers.

In general, Barbary corsairs tried to take their prey without a fight. Corsairs were, after all, a species of predator, and whenever possible, predators go after easy prey—there's less chance of sustaining injury themselves that way. Sometimes, however, a fight was unavoidable. Such was the case when the Algerine corsairs encountered the *Conceição*.

One of the aspects of Mascarenhas' narrative that makes it so valuable is that it describes in great detail the attempts made by the crew of the *Conceição* to fight off the fleet of corsair ships that assailed them—one of the most detailed descriptions of a sea battle between corsairs and their intended prey that we have.

This week, the battle commences...

When it was attacked, our ship was in the worst possible state. During the seven days it had taken us to sail from the Azores, we had done nothing but carry luggage and bundles up on deck from below. Passengers from India typically fit what they have brought with them into light luggage. In order to avoid paying the excessive duties that are charged on anything transported belowdecks, they insist that their baggage be brought up on deck towards the end of the voyage.

The crew were tired from the exertion of carrying so many pieces of luggage, and they were taken unawares. Moreover, the ship's deck was clogged and crowded with baggage and cluttered with mooring

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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lines that had been pulled out in preparation for anchoring at Cascais.

Our enemies were numerous. Despite everything, however, our men acted with so much courage and ardor that in less than a quarter of an hour they had cleared the bridge and cleaned it with large tubs of water, carried the passengers' luggage back down belowdecks, and set up protective rope nets and shields.

All our men were armed and at their posts.

The armament was very poor, though—for as it had been several years since the ship had left India, and it had passed through two severe monsoon seasons, which are common in India. The men's muskets were in bad shape and very cumbersome, and the lances were too long and all rotten. The courage of the men, however, compensated for the defects of their weapons.

Gunners were assigned at the rate of one for every two guns, though it would have taken at least two for each gun to operate them effectively. But the men behaved like old soldiers. Our captain, Dom Luis de Sousa, placed himself in the middle of the bridge, a steel shield on his arm and a naked sword in his hand, waiting bravely for the cannonade of the enemy.

Our ship lay motionless in a light wind.

Remaining on their guard, and in good combat formation, the enemy suddenly approached us, all at the same time, from all sides and with all their ships. They injured and killed many of our people in that meeting. One of the first balls carried away the leg of the master gunner, who died immediately. It was a

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heavy loss, for he was very brave and very proficient when it came to artillery. A splinter struck and badly wounded a young man who was on the bridge and who had been an officer aboard a galley. Since he could no longer move, he was later burned alive when our ship was set on fire.

There were then more than twenty-five victims, dead and wounded combined. One of them was the captain, who remained on deck. A musket ball broke his sword in two, which he held pointing down, and struck him on his right leg, where the garter was—not a serious injury. But immediately another bullet from the same origin struck him in the same way, striking his leg a span higher and passing through the muscle. As he was greatly weakened and unable to remain upright, he lay down on a crate at the mouth of a hatch, and from there he gave his orders.

The enemy, among whom our artillery had wreaked havoc with chain-shot and bar-shot, withdrew, most of their ships damaged by the fighting, and also because of the resulting danger from the proximity of our ship, for when it rolled, because of its great size, it would tear away the spars and bowsprits, along with their rigging, of the corsair ships alongside it.

One of these corsair ships, the largest, with more than forty guns, was captained by Calafat Hassan, the bravest Turk in Algiers, and well known as such. Seeing that his ship was lost, demolished by our bar-shot, and ready to sink under the effect of the many cannonballs it had received, he made a virtue of necessity (though this did not diminish his act of courage), and, abandoning his ship and brandishing a red flag which he had snatched from the stern, he leapt onto our ship and entrenched himself in the forecastle with four hundred Turks and Moors whom

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he had brought with him. These were the bravest of Algiers, the elite, and for the most part renegades like him.

He fastened his flag to the foremast, and he and his people launched a volley of arrows and musket shot, followed by many others, causing us great harm.

During this fight, with our men holding the deck and the stern, and they the bow, a renegade from Setubal climbed the foremast, and, with a hatchet, began to cut as much of the rigging as he could. Addressing his fellows, calling each by name, he urged them to join him, or he would do it all by himself with his hatchet. He cut the stays of the foreyard, which fell so suddenly with such violence that all the Turks below it were killed.

Our enemies were so numerous and so closely packed together that all our musket balls hit them. Two of these Turks came out boldly from the forecastle where they were, and passed with their scimitars over the rope bridge, shouting “Avast, you scoundrels!” One of them scrambled up the mainmast ratlines and was already near the top when he was hit by a bullet and fell dead. The other passed to the stern and reached the cockpit of the compass, where he was killed by a sword thrust.

In the middle of this tight fight, a black Javanese cook who was among us ran amok—such is the custom of their country when a man decides to kill his enemy or to die trying. Climbing alone on the rope bridge with a bare sword in his hand, he rushed towards all the Turks on the forecastle. But he received so many bullets and arrows that he could not carry out his plan and was immediately killed.

For the next installment of João Mascarenhas' narrative, see the next post in this blog.

At that moment a soldier told Pero Mendes de Vasconcelos, who was traveling with his wife and children and carrying forty thousand cruzados 1, to step aside a little because of two Tures: one was aiming at him with a escopette and the other was aimed at

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Ólafur Egilsson**